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Reflections of Veterans Day

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By Paul Ross, Managing Editor, Navy Medicine Magazine, U.S. Navy Bureau of Medicine and Surgery



I joined the military in 2004 as a way to pay for college and because it seemed like a better option than roofing houses and waiting tables. There wasn't much patriotism behind my decision. Both my grandfather's had served, one in the Air Force and one in the Army. As I was closer to the former, I arrived down in San Antonio, Texas, to learn how to be an Airman in the U.S. Air Force.

As we crossed underneath the historic arch at Lackland, Air Force Base, I remember asking myself, "Why did you do this?" After serving four years and then getting out to work as a civilian for the Department of Veterans Affairs and the U.S. Navy, I now know what I didn't then.

Throughout my short government career I've had a few moments where I have truly realized the essential and difficult role veterans of the U.S. military serve.

While working at a VA medical center I met a young Marine who was severely injured in an IED blast in Iraq. He lost both of his legs from the thigh down. While talking in his room I asked, "What made you join the Marines?" He replied simply, "To serve my country." He then said something that I'll always remember, "And I would do it the exact same way if I had the choice." His love for this country astounded me. Here was a young man who will never be the same, yet he could not wait to get back to duty serving and protecting each and every U.S. citizen.

There are four boys in my family; three of us have served in the military. The youngest of the four joined the Army and graduated from infantry school at Fort Benning, Ga. When he got in trouble at the age of eight for digging a foxhole in my mom's backyard, we knew this would eventually be his decision. Shortly after getting the blue cord put on his shoulder, he shipped out to Mosul, Iraq. His main missions included convoy support and searching for insurgents. He lost close friends and fellow Soldiers. He had two brushes with death – one in the form of a sniper's bullet flying inches from his head, the other an IED that exploded underneath his humvee, which sent shrapnel through the bottom of the vehicle, again missing him by inches.

Navy Medicine Video

Navy Medicine is a global healthcare network of 63,000 Navy medical personnel around the world who provide high quality health care to more than one million eligible beneficiaries. Navy Medicine personnel deploy with Sailors and Marines worldwide, providing critical mission support aboard ship, in the air, under the sea and on the battlefield.

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There were a few times when the sounds of his choked-back tears were clear over a static-filled call from across the world. He told me that there is nothing grand or beautiful from the frontlines of a war. But before he hung up he would reassure me that he made the right decision and of his undying love for the Army and for this country – that is why he joined, why he took up arms to fight for freedom.

Now I have the great privilege of helping tell the story of Navy Medicine and its numerous brave Sailors, who deliver care all around the world to their fellow shipmates and Marines whenever called upon. They treat the visible wounds and the hidden ones of service members returning from war. And there is no other story I'd rather tell.

Most of us know someone who has served or who is currently donning a uniform. So in recognition of Veterans Day, please take the time to pay respect to those who deploy aboard massive ships, those who dirty their boots with desert sand, and those who have paid the ultimate sacrifice for defending our country and its star-spangled flag.

And if you are a veteran, thank you for your commitment to all of us and our way of life.

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